

Jesus and Zacchaeus (and the healing of blind Bartimaeus)

Luke 18v35-53 Healing a blind Man

³⁵ As Jesus approached Jericho, a blind man was sitting by the roadside begging. ³⁶ When he heard the crowd going by, he asked what was happening. ³⁷ They told him, "Jesus of Nazareth is passing by." ³⁸ He called out, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" ³⁹ Those who led the way rebuked him and told him to be quiet, but he shouted all the more, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" ⁴⁰ Jesus stopped and ordered the man to be brought to him. When he came near, Jesus asked him, ⁴¹ "What do you want me to do for you?" "Lord, I want to see," he replied. ⁴² Jesus said to him, "Receive your sight; your faith has healed you." ⁴³ Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus, praising God. When all the people saw it, they also praised God.

Luke 19v1-10 – Zacchaeus

19 Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. ² A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. ³ He wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short he could not see over the crowd. ⁴ So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way. ⁵ When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today." ⁶ So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly. ⁷ All the people saw this and began to mutter, "He has gone to be the guest of a sinner." ⁸ But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount." ⁹ Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham." ¹⁰ For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."

Intro – The Oppressor.

Did you ever get into trouble at school? Did you upset another student, or do something to that person that they wasn't really nice? I was 14, and in Year 10 at a small grammar school. We weren't the best behaved year! One Sunny hot day, they left the sprinkler out over lunch on one of our playing fields. It gave out quite a spray, and my group of lads decided we would all run through the middle of the spray and jump over the sprinkler, whilst of course in our school uniforms. I went first, and others followed. Except one lad. I'll call him Macklow. He was the smallest of our group, and not only did not want to do it, but refused when coaxed. The solution was obvious, we jumped Macklow, and holding his arms and legs we moved towards the spray until we held him above the sprinkler. Trouble is, he wriggled too much, and we ended up dropping him. He fell directly onto the sprinkler and broke it. We all ran off. The next day after whole school Assembly, our rather scary deputy head, who we had named Pogle after a stout old man in a children's programme, told all Year 10 boys to stay behind. Uh-oh. We stood there half way down the hall, and still standing at the front, Pogle asked in a loud stern voice – which one of you broke the sprinkler. Some muffled voices started to raise up a chant 'Macklow, Macklow'. Pogle called Macklow to the front of the hall, and in a raised voice we heard – Did you break the sprinkler? No-one lied to Pogle. "Yes Sir" came a small voice, "but..but..they dropped me on it". Without even asking, Pogle reeled off a short list of surnames including mine. The rest of the boys were dismissed and we quite justly spent our revision period washing graffiti off of the wall in the boys toilets, supervised by Pogle.

The point is, that I didn't wittingly set out to pick on Maklow. I was just thinking of myself, trying to have some fun, and at the same time protect my own popularity, and my hard earned place in the pecking order. For an asthmatic who was marginalised at Primary school, staying popular at senior school was a big deal to me. Nevertheless on that day, I was bullying Macklow, I was the 'Oppressor'. The bible teaches us to look out for the oppressed – The poor, the widow, the outcast and the marginalised all receive Gods special attention and compassion. In Marys Magnificat we read "He has put down the mighty from their thrones, and the rich he has sent empty away. So we naturally don't like those that pick on the oppressed. Those of us who support them ,must surely be obliged to dislike those picking on them. We don't like the oppressor. But is that how God really feels?

We get angry with all the injustice in the world, and we pray for justice and mercy for the oppressed, and we might even pray that justice comes flowing in like a mighty river.

A Steve Turner poem reads:- Careful how you pray now; You pray justice come rollin down; like a mighty river; and it might just come rollin'; down your street; might come beatin' up your walls; might come licking 'neath your door. Might get wet; Might drown.

The truth is , we are part of the problem of injustice. Oh dear! But **there is** some good news for the oppressor. To find out what that is, we need to travel with Jesus to the town of Jericho, which its claimed is the first place to use bricks for building. At least that's what they said on Radio 2!

Heading for Jericho

Ever since he came down from the Mount of Transfiguration, he has been heading South from lower galilee to his final destination of Jerusalem. There used to be a relaxed air about him, and he would take his time, and travel all over, accepting any hospitality. Now he has a sense of urgency about him, almost an abruptness. Imagine travelling with Jesus. He has 12 apostles, but lots more disciples, and more and more people keep joining this large procession southwards. Probably a minimum of 150 people travelling with him. This number of people had been swamping all the small villages they had travelled through with the pilgrims looking for food, but today you are about to enter the historic town of Jericho. This is the place which allegedly made the first ever bricks! This is the town Joshua surrounded and marched round (c1300 BC) where the walls came tumbling down. In the days of Jesus it was a fine town. Herod originally leased Jericho from Cleopatra, after Mark Antony gave it to her as a gift. After their joint suicide in 30 BC, Octavian assumed control of the Roman Empire and granted Herod absolute rule over Jericho, as part of the new Herodian domain. Herod's rule oversaw the construction of a hippodrome-theatre to entertain his guests and new aqueducts to irrigate the area below the cliffs and reach his winter palace.

Word had reached Jericho that Jesus and his followers are on their way to the town, and such a prominent rabbi, could not go without a welcoming committee and a banquet in his honour. The hospitality reputation of the town was at stake, and there would have been much excitement, worry and debate on what to do by the dignitaries.

The beggar (His cry, beckoning and question)

Plans made, a large crowd headed out to meet him, and did so on the North side of town, near the spot where a blind man begged. From the noise and size of crowd he knew that that was some-one very important had come to town, but who?.

"Why the commotion, Whose coming? Who is it? Did you say Jesus, the Rabbi, the healer, here, passing by now, really?"

"Yes, yes – enough of you – it is Jesus of Nazareth"

"JESUS – Jesus, Son of David – Have mercy on me" – he shouts out as loud as he can.

"Be Quiet" "Shut-up" "Pipe down you"

"SON OF DAVID - Have mercy on me"

Luke sensitively omits a detail which Mark includes, the name of the beggar is Bartimaeus, which means 'Son of Filth'. This is not one of your most respected citizens. There is plenty of noise and bustle anyway, but the shout of this beggar transcends all, and is annoying the crowd, so they turn on him. Do we sense some bullying of the beggar going on here? One thing is certain, he is not going to shut up,

Jesus aware of his cries, turns to those in the crowd who are marginalising the beggar, and in a lovely twist, now order them to help the beggar and fetch him. He could have gone over himself, but with the twist, the offenders in the crowd not become the servants of a King bringing a guest into his presence.

Then when Bartimaeus approaches Jesus he is examined with what could seem to us a heartless question? “What do you want me to do for you?”. In fairness, the beggar has not yet said, and needs to verbalise his request. This is because his blindness is his means of income, and without it he will struggle.

The first century beggar would proclaim to passer-bys that he heard coming – ‘Give to God’, in other words ‘I am helping you by giving you a golden opportunity to fulfil your alms-giving obligation to God’., but also to gain a good reputation in this busy public place where others can see your generosity. When obliged, the beggar would then loudly heap praise on the giver, whatever the amount and will invoke God’s blessing on the giver, home, his family and friends etc. This worked well for the beggar, but those that had loss of vision were preferred and would do well. If you had just lost a limb you might struggle to make end meet. The ‘son of filth’, born blind from birth would have no education, skill or trade to fall back on. If healed of his blindness, he could struggle to support himself, so it may be in his best interest to stay blind. The Grace of God is free, but can still be costly. We may have the grace from God of a miraculous healing, a free gift from Jesus. But now we have a testimony that we are expected to share, and that can be costly.

But Bartimaeus has counted the cost – “**Lord**, I want to see.”

Healed by Faith

The moment Jesus is about to heal some-one is always exciting, the disciples are expectant – they know now what’s coming. For the crowd, a mere intrigue will turn to amazement.

Jesus lovingly looks into the eyes of the ‘son of filth’ and declares “Receive your sight; your faith has healed you.”. Immediately, the man is healed.

Sometimes it is just Gods grace that heals some-one who is not expecting it such as the man whose demons were cast into pigs. Other times, it is the pure belief and faith of the ill person (or one of their friends) which attracts the miracle. What was the faith of this beggar?

He has faith that Jesus has compassion on the poor (and would take note of him). He had faith that Jesus having seen him could heal him. He had faith that Jesus was the Messiah, as he used his messianic title ‘Son of David’ He was right on all accounts & his faith brought him healing.

Response to the healing

Bartimaeus immediately followed Jesus, giving praises to God. Despite the verbal slap on the wrist the crowd amazed by the compassion of Jesus for the beggar, and the restoration of his sight. They joined with the oppressed beggar in giving praises to God. It would be a different matter though when the same mercy is extended to an oppressor.

Roman Taxation

A brief interlude before we continue our journey through Jericho, to look at the Roman tax system. There were taxes on crops and goods (fish), a poll tax, and a levy on transporting goods. But the burden was not believed to be too heavy. Taxes were collected by appointed ‘Tax Collectors’ (or Publicans). These were organised under head officials based at commercial centres such as Jericho, where Zacchaeus was the Chief of Collectors. They were highly unpopular and a Jew taking on this job would be seen as a ‘traitor’. So many of these jobs were taken by Gentiles. Tax Collectors were lumped in by repute with robbers, sinners and pagans. This view was solidified by those that exacted more taxes than they should and used them for personal gain. Jesus however did not share the general Jewish disdain for Tax Collectors and was only too keen to reach out to them, even taking one of them, Matthew, into his inner circle as one of the 12 disciples.

Zacchaeus

In Jericho as Jesus entered town, there was one prominent inhabitant, that was not amongst the crowds. Jericho's chief tax collector.

For some reason, we don't know why, Zacchaeus really wanted to see Jesus. So much so, he did two things, a wealthy man was never supposed to do. The first thing was to run. If you were seen running it would bring shame on you. In the parable of the prodigal son we see the Father running to greet his returning son and throw his arms around him, not caring what anyone else thought of him, an embarrassing spectacle of unrestrained love. He was running away from the crowds to the south of town. He may have overheard that Jesus was not staying after all and would be heading straight through the town.

Large trees were not allowed within the city limits, but they grew on the road out towards Jerusalem. Sycamore figs were grown because they made great beams for house structures. They also had large low branches and thick foliage, so perfect for climbing into if you were short, and great for hiding in, if you were trying to avoid a crowd seeing you.

Zacchaeus was surprised at the size of the crowd that came out of town on the Jerusalem road, and as hard as he tried to stay unnoticed there were too many people around his tree. Perhaps it was one of the children that looked up first and spotted him. A man up a tree – who on earth could it be? More excitement in Jericho! Then when they realised who it was, astonishment gave way to anger. The polecat caught up a tree. All the words they would have liked to have said to him in his office but weren't – could now be shouted at the despised traitor from their anonymity in the cover of the crowd. Jesus stopped opposite the tree and gauged the name, occupation and predicament of the occupant from the jeering.

The reason he was up the tree, was not because he was short, but because he was hated and wanted to hide. If he had been a popular rich nobleman, then the crowd would have parted for him to go to the front, just like we would have done had Zara Phillips been in the crowd with us at the Olympic torch relay rather than on the horse. We would have happily looked over the shoulder of this show jumping star that is also Queens Grand-daughter. However being in this crowd is much like if an Irish IRA collaborator was caught up a tree in Protestant area of Belfast during the marching season, or an Israeli collaborator at a Palestinian political rally. If he came down, he may well find a knife in his back!

The crowd see Jesus about to speak to the chief tax man, no doubt to tear him off a strip for aligning himself with the Roman enemy and oppressing God's people. Go for it Jesus – tell him good and proper! Jesus calls out to the worried onlooker, and above the other voices he shouts ZACCHAEUS – COME DOWN. The crowd fall silent, expectant, but what Jesus did next was totally unexpected, without precedence, and would have diverted the anger of the crowd onto himself.

“Come on down, I've decided I'm staying at yours tonight – go and get some food ready for us”

In the Middle East a town decides who will play host to a visitor dependent upon their wealth and status. The visitor never chooses the host family. Secondly, no guest to a town would go the house of an enemy collaborator. For the taxman, the Jews would regard his food and his home as ritually unclean. How could a rabbi feast and stay-over there, as he would emerge ritually unclean. Is there how the 'Messiah' would behave on the eve of the Passover celebration. Surely not.

Jesus did not endorse the behaviour of the oppressor, nor does he condemn him, he just shows love for him. The Jericho crowd accepted the Rabbi's compassion towards the oppressed Bartimaeus, but they would not accept his compassion towards the oppressor Zacchaeus. The crowd's anger would now turn on Jesus. Jesus had taken the bullet

for Zacchaeus, who was delighted & excited about the prospect, and it also guaranteed he would get home in one piece. He had been saved.

The Speech.

As was the tradition, he went home and from his wealth he put on a wonderful banquet. The guests would all be reclining at the meal table, and the time came for the host to stand up and make his formal speech. No-one had told Zacchaeus what he must do in response to the love that Jesus had shown him. He had no instruction booklet on how a follower of Jesus should behave, but what he did do, was to take the example of Jesus, and respond likewise to that love.

“Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.” In true Middle Eastern style he exaggerates to show the sincerity of his response. Had he just said I will do what I can with my money to make good anything I have wrongly taken from the townsfolk, it would have been taken as meaning he would do nothing. By saying he would give away half his possessions and 4 times what he had cheated would have been mathematically impossible if he had made just a 13% mark-up. But it was an acceptable exaggeration in that culture to show he was a man who genuinely was sincere in generously putting right what he had done wrong. He will clean up his act with the community. Jesus will be his role model, and the costly love shown to him, will be his standard.

What had brought the life transforming power that brought repentance from Zacchaeus was not from Jesus inviting himself over for a meal, but from the deliberate act of shifting the town’s hostility from Zacchaeus upon himself. With just one week left to live, this is a foretaste of what Jesus will be doing for Zacchaeus again on the cross, and for the rest of us. By his stripes we are healed. He took the wrath that we should have faced, he took the bullet for us. The realisation of this is as life transforming for us today as it was for Zacchaeus in Jericho.

In Jewish eyes, for those deemed sinners, such as robbers and tax collectors, you can only have repentance with restitution. You have to put right what you have done wrong, give back what you have taken. This act must precede your repentance. However Jesus declares over Zacchaeus that salvation has come, at the moment his heart has changed, even before he has given back a penny. He does not require acts of restitution to bring salvation.

Jesus declares that Zacchaeus is also a son of Abraham. Abraham was a man who stepped out in faith to follow Yahweh’s leading. He left his father’s house and gods, and his own country in costly obedience and personal sacrifice to do this. He stepped out not knowing where he was going, and Zacchaeus would start a new journey into the unknown. So whilst he does not require acts of restitution to bring salvation, Zacchaeus will spend the rest of his life working out his salvation, as would blind Bartimaeus.

The beggar has given up his livelihood for his sight, and Zacchaeus has given up his inflated income and false gains for his acceptance. Both will follow Jesus for the rest of their lives and will probably both face early deaths at the hands of the Romans or others for what they believed and preached. Why do I say that, because the writers of the New Testament would have given names to people that were widely known, and not to those that weren’t, so with the exception of figure heads such as Pilate, Herod Antipas and the Chief Priest Caiaphas, the others named would most likely have gone on to be prominent church leaders, or evangelists. Tradition tells us that of the apostles only John reached old age, the others would have met early and violent deaths for their faith, and there is no reason to believe that the odds were any better for the other well known Christians of the day – for Nicodemus, Jairus, Mary Magdalene, Simon of Cyrene. Others in the Gospels would not have been known of so are just described rather than named e.g. the Rich Young Ruler, the Syro-Phoenician woman, the Samaritan woman at the well, the centurion’s servant etc. That

doesn't mean that they were not saved. Its not about having you name in a Religious book, that's important, its about having your name written in the 'Lambs book of life', according to Revelation. If your names down in that book belonging to Jesus', then you've got your invite to the party that really counts, the one in Heaven.

Filth to Purity

The Jericho names are interesting. Whilst Bartim-aeus means son of filth, Zacch-aeus means Purity or Innocence. So we start the story looking at some-one lost in their filth and their own sin, and we finish with salvation wiping away some-ones sins so that they are now pure and innocent in Gods eyes. From filth to purity.

Zaccheus went up a tree in Jericho to see Jesus and he got saved.

A week later...Jesus went up a tree at Calvary, so he could save all of us.

Whereas Bartimaus means Son of Filth, Zaccheus means son of purity or innocence. Thanks to Jesus being crucified on that tree, we can go our own journey from Filth to Purity in Gods eyes. Without accepting what Jesus did on the cross for us, we are seen by Gods as filthy rags, we are stuck in our Sin and in our guilt. But accepting the sacrifice that Jesus made for us, and letting his love invade our lives, then he wipes away that sin and guilt, and we are purified and made innocent in Gods eyes. Why, because Jesus has paid for it all by dying for us. He took the bullet, just like he did for Zaccheus. He can heal us just like he did with Bartimaus.

As we respond to that love, that free gift of Grace and Salvation, we spend the rest of our lives working out that Salvation, and responding to his love by loving others as did Bartimaus and Zaccheus. Part of that calling as Christians is to realise that Jesus has love for both the oppressed and the oppressor.

We must indeed make an effort to show love to those that are suffering, the poor and the destitute. Jesus said we you show love to them, it is as if you are doing it to me directly. So be generous with your time and your money to those in need.

But an even greater challenge is to show love to those that have done us harm. Those that have bullied or oppressed us; said or done things that have really hurt us. It may have affected your family harmony, derailed your career, taken away or harmed your Christian ministry. It has stopped you being the person you were supposed to be. Your oppressor, may well be some-one you loved a lot, a family member, it could be some-one from your church or another church. You know.

The result is that you now have a well of hurt and anger inside you which you have found hard to get rid of. You've tried to forgive and forget, but the anger and hurt is still there. It's in your heart and the pressure of it pushing against the doors of your heart (which open inwards) and not letting the love of God in to replace it. I know its hard as I have struggled much with this myself. But we need to ask for Gods spirit to drill into that well of hurt and anger, and direct the flow of hurt and anger (almost like a Roman aqueduct) back to Jesus, all the way to the foot of the Cross, where it will be soaked up and disappear. Then pray that God through his Spirit will come and refill that well within our hearts with his Peace, his Love and his Joy. Be healed. Be restored. Be transformed.

We then need to pray for and show love to those that have hurt us. Why, because of Jesus. He does not condone what they have done to you (God hates Sin), but he does not condemn them either. He loves them, and expects us to respond to them with the same love. He told his disciples – 'Love your enemies', and this is what it means to us today. To get Gods healing in our hearts for the hurts that we have received, to accept his healing love, then to show that love to those that have harmed us. Amen